

# IDENTIFYING A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE TO MEET THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF TWICE-MIGRATED SUDANESE REFUGEES

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*Twice-migrated Sudanese refugees are newcomers to the United States who relocate to cities and towns not prepared to offer services necessary for integrating them into their communities. The purpose of this report is to propose a theoretical perspective to better understand the educational needs of twice-migrated Sudanese youth, a new contribution to the literature useful for practitioners and researchers. The theoretical construct emerged from blending discussions in the literature about immigrant populations and the author's school administrative experiences with twice-migrated Sudanese families. The theory suggests that twice-migrated Sudanese students encounter cultural and peer challenges as well as educational services that do not match their prior schooling and academic aspirations.*

The proliferation of newcomers to the United States will continue to pose unique challenges and opportunities for American public schools. Historically, large urban school districts embodied the image of diverse student populations that mirrored the very communities in which they existed. Typical immigrants and refugees entered the United States at large port cities, such as New York, and continued their residency there to access jobs, housing, and places of worship. The trend in recent times, however, has shifted. Seaport cities and large urban areas throughout the country no longer serve as the sole dwelling options for newcomers. Rural and smaller urban towns (e.g. Salina, Kansas) sometimes surpass their urban counterparts in offering better job opportunities and more affordable housing, essential ingredients for newcomers' quests for security and stability.

In this article I trace the trend of twice-migrated Sudanese refugees, newcomers who opt to self-initiate their relocations to smaller cities and towns. In doing so, I propose a theoretical perspective for the education of twice-migrated youth, which has otherwise not been fully defined and discussed in the literature. One could argue that such a theory should have already existed if public schools truly strove to accommodate all of its citizens. Yet, the increased onslaught of newcomers is relatively recent, resulting from the 1990 *Immigration Act* passed by Congress.

The rate of newcomers had increased by 40% by the turn of the current century (Contreras, 2002). Within seven years of the Act's implementation, the United States population included 9.7% foreign-born citizens (see United States Census, 1997, reported in Driscoll, 1999). Ethnographer, Pipher (2002) reported: "According to the official World Refugee Survey 2001 of the United States Committee for Refugees, there were 14.5 million refugees and asylum seekers and more than 20 million internationally displaced people at the end of 2000" (p. 56). Rong and Brown (2002) predicted: "By the year 2010, the number of Black immigrants and children of Black immigrants is

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expected to reach 5 million" (p. 247), as a potential result of the 1990 *Immigration Act*.

A dearth of literature exists about the plight of Sudanese refugees who self-initiated their twice-migration to other places throughout the country. Indeed, a theoretical understanding about the nation's refugee population is, at best, in an emergent state. However, the years that followed the 1990 *Immigration Act* can serve as an historical base from which to understand the new influx.

Refugees from Sudan, a poor African country plagued with internal and external problems (Khaleefa, Erdos, & Ashria, 1996), contributed to the increased newcomer population in the United States after 1990. Specifically, residents of the country's southern half, the Nuer, fled due to an ongoing civil war that began in 1983 between northern and southern residents. Since the 1950s when Great Britain's rule ended, the second largest African nation's struggle to define its identity and create a system of governance based on social, political, economic, and religious platforms had fueled a civil war. Northern Arab residents of the Sudan asserted an Islamic-based government that threatened southern residents who had converted to Christianity through contact with foreign religious missionaries. Holtzman (2000) explained the deleterious effects of the war on families and children:

There were a variety of options open to Nuer within this brutal context, none of them particularly attractive. Some tried to remain, moving to safer areas within their region, eking out whatever meager existence was possible. This situation was particularly difficult for children whose parents were killed or who were separated from their parents in the war. Groups of 100 to 200 children wandered the countryside, surviving as they could on fish or other wild foods, earning the moniker 'The Lost Boys of Sudan.' (p. 18)

Many Nuer accepted the United National High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) offer to relocate to Ethiopia. The viable option dissolved in 1992 when an Ethiopian revolution resulted in a new ruling power that expunged refugees.

The second wave of migration led the Nuer to Kenyan refugee camps; from there they received information about permanent resettlement options in Australia, Canada, and the United States (Holtzman, 2000; Pipher, 2002). The ability to relocate to the United States, however, required

more than escape from war-torn Sudan and Ethiopia. Potential newcomers needed to present evidence of their at-risk status, summarized in an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) (1997) policy:

A refugee is an alien outside the United States who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country because of well-founded fear of persecution. Claims of persecution must be based on race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group or political opinion. (p. 72)

The majority of Nuer who met the INS criteria and entered the United States were youth and younger adults able to withstand the rigor required to traverse the African countryside to reach resettlement camps (Holtzman, 2000). They selected the United States as their destination because of their perceptions that the country would afford them economic, religious, and political freedoms (Gibson, 1997).

Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix (2000) and Trueba, Cheng, and Ima (1993) argued that although the United States' overall immigrant-refugee population is federal, the states most immediately affected have been ones INS predestined for Sudanese newcomers: (1) California, (2) Florida, (3) Illinois, (4) New Jersey, (5) New York, and (6) Texas. A newer trend soon emerged once the Sudanese refugees encountered numerous hardships. Pipher (2002) shadowed immigrants and refugees in Nebraska, including Nuer, and explained how their struggles resulted in self-initiated relocations:

One common, and generally not very adaptive, way refugees deal with pain and difficulties in America is to move. Moves are common among refugees as they find one town difficult and hear rumors that the grass is greener in other places. . . . Because they are inexpensive places to live, easy places to find work, and relatively crime-free, towns like Salina, Kansas, and Fargo, North Dakota, are receiving newcomers. (p. 55, 284)

Additional discussions in the literature further clarify the adversities Sudanese refugees encountered once they arrived in the United States, such as (a) difficulty obtaining jobs, (b) lack of affordable housing, (c) great distances from friends and families, (d) limited access to places of worship, and (e) inadequate educational services for children (Holtzman, 2000; Palladino, 2004; Pipher, 2002).

Overall, the educational well-being of Nuer newcomers is not well-documented in the literature (Rong & Brown, 2002; Tillman, 2002). Researchers have identified topics in need of exploration among this population: (a) gaps in academic performances (Hao & Bonstead-Burns, 1998), (b) girls' access to schooling (Palladino, 2004), (c) policy implications (Contreras, 2002), (d) youths' socio-emotional well-being in schools (Driscoll, 1999; Kirova, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2002), and (e) the impact of racism and stereotypes in school communities (Rong & Brown, 2002). Research studies should solicit the voice of Sudanese refugees and encourage them to tell their stories (Holtzman, 2000) in order to eradicate hostility towards newcomers and to reveal biases that may emerge in the absence of firsthand accounts.

## **Method**

For the purpose of this article, I responded to Ullman's (1999) argument that researchers who represent a marginalized population need to self-immerse in their qualitative research and rule-in their investigative biases. The author contended that among such populations a dearth of potential research participants may exist and, therefore, an investigator who represents the very population should place him/herself in a dual role of researcher and participant. Explicitly, the author challenged members of marginalized groups who enter higher education to employ a retrospective analysis within their research about the very population from which they emerged and model the process.

Although not a member of marginalized Sudanese refugees living in the United States, I have had direct professional contact with this population as a former school principal. My experience was unique and one that has served as a launching pad for a research agenda. The discussion that follows explains how I used retrospective analysis to propose a theoretical framework about the unique educational needs of twice-migrated Sudanese. In doing so, I apply and somewhat adapt the method Ullman (1999) proposed. My retrospection occurred after I conducted an empirical research study about twice-migrated Sudanese (Palladino, 2004) in which I had ruled-out my researcher biases to the maximum extent possible.

I begin with a summary of findings, observations, and comments other researchers offered, woven together by similarities. The second component consists of my aforementioned qualitative case study research within twice-migrated

Sudanese communities that included interviews with Sudanese parents, school administrators and teachers, and government caseworkers ( $N = 13$ ). The third component consists of my personal experiences as a former elementary school administrator of a program that served self-relocated Sudanese families in a Midwest location.

## **Results**

### *Culture Switching*

Tanners (1997) explained the temptations newcomer youth often encounter:

At the very beginning the immigrant students are subdued, get tempted by the new sense of freedom. By the end of the first year, they have embraced the mass culture. [They are] influenced by their fellow classmates, mass media campaigns, [and] begin to neglect their studies. (p. 224)

The anxiety of 'fitting in' causes any student to examine his/her peers' dress, speech, activities, and possessions to determine the criteria necessary to win approval. Sudanese refugees are no exception. Like their peers, the newcomers may experience conflict with their parents, adults who are viewed as contradicting the messages received from peers. Whereas traditional American youth wean themselves away from parental control and negotiate greater independence through their adolescent years, Sudanese refugee youth often do not escape their parents' dominance.

Hickey (1998) explained how two aspects of parent-child relationships in Sudanese newcomer families have created ongoing expected dependence and: "Unconditional loyalty to the family" (p. 444). First, refugee parents may need their children to speak English on their behalf, communication necessary to facilitate the family's daily functioning. Suarez-Orozco (2001) commented: "Frequently, poor immigrant children become the family expert on the ways of the new society" (p. 583). Second, Sudanese parents, often fearful of erosion of their Sudanese culture and standards, an unacceptable byproduct of their migration to and within the United States (Palladino, 2004; Pipher, 2002) use harsh corporal punishment as means of control. The approach often violates local laws and further perpetuates stereotypes about Sudanese parents' unwillingness to assimilate into the community. Pipher (2002) noted the reality of the problem: "Refugee parents have been told at cultural orientations that they

will be arrested if they discipline their children with physical force" (p. 228).

My administrative experiences corroborate the literature's portrayal of Sudanese parents' frustrations with an American culture that tempts their children to abandon Sudanese lifestyle and norms. I noticed that Sudanese fathers voiced their strong quest to 'keep the family Sudanese,' while mothers began to blend in with other non-Sudanese mothers and viewed the school's culture as positive. I attributed the dynamic to the fact the Sudanese mothers often nursed a newborn child and did not work a job outside of the home. They exercised their freedom to participate in school functions, a gradual process that facilitated their children's comfort with their new school. Fathers, however, only appeared when discipline notices were issued in response to their children's behavior. They approached teachers and myself, serving as an administrator, determined to convince us that they would physically discipline their children for the behavioral infractions and voiced their expectations that we continue to update them about their children's improved progress. On the surface, such parental loyalty to educators appeared admirable. Yet, a closer examination and dialogue about alternative ways to hold children accountable for misbehavior unearthed their firm conviction to maintain the child-to-adult respect that a person in authority ought to expect. Their perspective of an adult-child relationship in which youth are subservient to adults remained consistent.

School administrators involved in my qualitative research about the provision of educational services for twice-migrated Sudanese students also discussed the tension between Sudanese fathers and their children in comparison to noted tension between the Sudanese and the American-born Black culture. One elementary principal explained:

The tension between the two groups is very notable. The Black [African American] families already here before the Sudanese arrived resent the way that the Sudanese fathers act all 'high and mighty.' They feel mocked, as if the Sudanese think they [non-Sudanese Black families] are not good parents. Color of skin is not a unifying force; they definitely see their differences.

The act of culture switching often causes rifts between youth and their parents that far exceed the typical tensions between parents and children. It

forces twice-migrated Sudanese refugee youth to appear shameful of their culture in their parents' eyes unless they are clever enough to navigate the process in ways that do not subject them to authoritative reprimands.

### *Peer-Relationship Breakdowns*

The scant literature about culture switching suggests that refugees who obtained and succeeded in quality educational programs in their former homeland consequently fared better with friendships in their new locations (see Holtzman, 2000; Pipher, 2002; & Tanners, 1997). It appears, then, that youth who have culture switching abilities quickly master American curriculum, which seems to be an essential ingredient for friendship formation. Contreras (2002) reported that without the skill: "Immigrant children almost universally report experiences of violence, intimidation, or harassment" (p. 149).

Holtzman (2000) argued: "While schools find it necessary to place Nuer students in classes appropriate to their age and their social and physical development, this [process] may be out of step with their academic readiness" (p. 101). I encountered the dilemma of placing new Sudanese refugee students into the appropriate grade level. The INS data forwarded to our city's officials about the new Sudanese families did not include birthdates for any of the children, not to mention any complete educational records. Holtzman (2000) reported similar situations:

As Nuer gained permission to resettle, their names were frequently changed. Sometimes this was intentional, in order to assume the identity of an absent person who had been granted a resettlement interview. Other times a bureaucratic mistake mixed up someone's first, last, and middle name. (p. 30)

The students arrived on the first day of school with limited English proficiency and could not articulate their perceived grade level. Without prior experiences with refugee families and lack of protocols, we subjected the students to grade assignments based on our grossly inadequate ability to equate the Sudanese youths' physical development with that of the non-Sudanese students. Peer relationship problems manifested as a result of developmental and emotional differences among age groups.

Even though we corrected our errors and placed the Sudanese youth in grade levels based

on their actual ages, peer relationship problems continued as a result of non-inclusive educational practices. Throughout my qualitative research, teacher participants stressed the need for Sudanese youth of all ages to acquire phonetic skills typical to the ones taught in the primary grades. Despite the awkwardness of singling-out twice-migrated refugee students for phonetic instruction in the upper elementary and secondary grades, they proceeded to do so. They intended to empower the Sudanese students to master the English language for success in future educational pursuits and assimilation into their peer groups. They did not equate their instructional decisions with any potential ridicule the refugee youth might endure from their peers for having to receive below grade level instruction. Likewise, they did not consider instructing the peers about compassionate responses for the Sudanese youth's educational limitations.

#### *Discord between Learner Needs and Educational Services*

A plethora of discussion about African Americans' 'miseducation' exists in the literature, especially within the special education discipline. For example, Webb-Johnson (2003) argued that African Americans who, as the author termed, "behave Black" place themselves at risk for educational discrimination. The author cited census counts of African American students labeled with an emotional-behavioral disorder (EBD):

Throughout most of the United States, African American learners are overrepresented in the emotional-behavior disordered (EBD) population. While African Americans account for 17% of the current U.S. school-age population, they account for 27.3% of all the children and youth who receive educational services for youth identified as having EBD. (p. 3)

The discussion about Black refugee youth's overrepresentation in special education remains undeveloped. Rong and Brown's (2002) description of a typical immigrant student suggests that a possible parallel between the educational experiences of African Americans and African refugee students exists: "Generally speaking, it may be difficult for immigrants to learn to cope cognitively, attitudinally, and behaviorally in a new cultural system in a very short period of time (p. 247)."

The arrival of twice-migrated Sudanese refugees into small urban communities may occur without prior notification to school officials, especially if the Sudanese families self-initiate their remigration. Furthermore, the pattern of Sudanese enrollments in a community's school district may not justify the implementation of a refugee-based educational program akin to the ones in large urban school districts. At best, school officials must accommodate the refugee students within the parameters of their present services, a potential limitation that may result in biased assumptions that refugee youth require special education intervention. Rong and Brown (2004) claimed: "Few teachers are equipped to deal effectively with children from different cultures, languages, lifestyles, and values" (p. 269).

As a school administrator, I noticed an increased number of special education referrals for Sudanese students when attempts to teach phonics and the English language failed. Teachers equated the Sudanese youth's unsuccessful attainment of the skills with inherent academic limitations and/or defiance, manifestations they equated with the need for special education intervention. No evidence existed about the teachers' acknowledgement of broader cultural implications in their assessments. For example, the standards to which our school was held accountable (e.g., high-stakes testing) required students to express their thoughts and opinions in cohesive essays. Language instruction included strategies for writing detailed paragraphs and narratives. Yet, our Sudanese students formerly educated in Sudan did not participate in an educational system that endorsed expressive language skills. Its government-controlled educational system required mastery of facts. Lynch, Qarib Allah, and Omer (1992) summarized typical Sudanese educational practice: "The [Sudan] government provides prizes for the pupils who proved the most adept at memorizing the Quran" (p. 56).

Administrative and teacher participants in my qualitative research shared similar student deficit perspectives toward their Sudanese populations. Their frustrations intensified when older Sudanese students arrived unannounced in their communities because middle and high schools could not provide services to help the students obtain quick and adequate mastery of the English language. They espoused special education services as the sole solution to a problem viewed beyond their control. A middle school principal, for example, explained the anxiety among her teachers:

We tried. We really did. The first quarter was all about getting them [the Sudanese refugees] on track with our program. We made some provisions, cut them some slack. But then, they [the students] decided to not do their part in the learning curve. They simply began to shut down, as if they resented our interventions to teach them English. Then their behaviors flared up and teachers resented the turmoil it caused in their classrooms. Really, what other options do I have? I am strapped for resources as it is. Perhaps a special education program would help them out, give them the attention that they're seeking.

None of my participants was able to confirm any conversations with twice-migrated Sudanese parents in which they discussed the youth's educational histories. It was apparent that they did not understand the educational infrastructure in which the Sudanese refugee parents and most of the children who were now in American public schools had participated. In fact, all participants were confident and unanimous in their responses to my question: "Why did the Sudanese families choose America for resettlement versus Australia or Canada?" They retorted: "Because of American freedom and the opportunity to work."

I posed the same question to the Sudanese parents. They did not report "freedom," but the opportunity to provide the best educational opportunities for their children, especially their daughters. They resented the infrastructure of the Sudan government's educational program that rewarded male students' mastery of Islamic religion. The Christian refugee parents did not want their children's educational pursuits to hinge upon a government-imposed religion. The educators' eventual appeal for special education intervention deflated the high expectations that the Sudanese parents hoped American public education could offer their children. True to their cultural practices of conformity with persons in authority, especially educators, the parents did not challenge the teachers' assessments. They, too, viewed the youth from a deficit perspective and expressed outrage toward their children. They equated their children's lack of academic success as misbehavior towards teachers' instruction versus a potential genuine need for English as a second language services or cultural understanding.

In sum, I wove together the above three components and propose the following theoretical

framework: Sudanese refugee youth living in non-Urban settings endure 'culture switching' that oftentimes results in peer-relationship breakdowns and teacher misinterpretations. Subsequent discord between learner needs and educational services, including the possible overuse of special education services oftentimes occurs. As such, teachers may lack a full awareness of Sudanese parents' historical backgrounds and present aspirations for themselves and their children, especially their daughters.

## **Discussion**

My proposed theory implies that educators of twice-migrated Sudanese refugees need to alter their deficit perspective of these children. Suarez-Orozco's (2001) insights justified the need for educator empowerment:

Talented, certified teachers have choices of where to work, and many do not choose to work for sustained periods of time in high burnout sites. Consequently, immigrant children often attend schools where teacher and principal turnover rates are staggeringly high. (p. 586)

In their work with Chaldean immigrant youth, Rubin and Bhavnagri (2001) advocated for educators to: "*Show* [italics added] [an] understanding of and empathy for immigrant students' circumstances" (p. 311). A similar argument can be made for teachers who work with twice-migrated Sudanese refugees. I stressed the term "show" because teachers' awareness should include collaborative dialogue with members of the Sudanese community. That is, educators should avoid discussions, professional development activities, and curriculum planning that do not have input from the twice-migrated refugees themselves.

The INS's criterion for exile to the United States confirms that all Sudanese refugee families, including some of the children, witnessed and/or experienced torture that preceded their entry into the United States. The trauma, concurrent with sustained cultural adherence to unquestionable respect for persons in authority, will require ongoing, consistent, and nonabrasive conversation that educators need to initiate so that Sudanese families can build trust.

My position aligns with Suarez-Orozco's (2001) assumption of immigrant parents:

School teachers must develop realistic models of parental involvement. They need to recognize that the majority of immigrant parents do value highly the

educational opportunities afforded their children, but several factors influence their active involvement in their children's schools. First, the American premise that "good" parents are active in advocating for their children in schools may run counter to the cultural values of many immigrant parents. (p. 583)

The ultimate disclosure of perceptions, ideas, and suggestions could move both parents and teachers beyond a deficit-oriented view of any refugee child's inability to master culture switching, peer relationship formation, and American academics and standards. Theilheimer's (2001) position corroborates mine: "Teachers and future teachers who do know a family's experience prior to arrival in a new country cannot guess how those experiences affect the child's and parent's reactions to school" (p. 285).

The need for dialogue that secures parental and teacher commitment to proposed solutions is most evident in the communities to which Sudanese refugees twice-migrate. Teachers may not be able to implement the suggestions reported in the literature that best meet the needs of these learners. For example, Borden (1998) recommended school administrators: "Be well versed in how to design high quality English as a Second Language (ESL) programs" (p. 25). The author further suggested that teachers receive adequate training in order to implement the programs. Since resources for such recommendations may not exist, educators may need to use trial-and-error with input from all essential stakeholders.

For example, my school implemented a reading program in the primary grades based on differentiated instructional methods. The teachers tapped into the assistance of Sudanese mothers to help manage the groups of students as they participated in various learning centers. Their involvement heightened their awareness of the language instruction used in the school that they could complement in their homes. It also created a unique bond between teachers and parents that eventually led to more in-depth dialogue about the families' historical experiences and aspirations for their future in the community.

Similarly, opportunities for dialogue need to occur between Sudanese refugee students and their new peers. It is not reasonable to assume that the two peer groups will form successful and respectful relationships on their own initiatives. Each group may hold biases and fears of the other group. Teachers cognizant of this potential

tension should engage members of both groups in semi-structured activities through which greater awareness of the other party occurs. For example, a fourth grade math lesson about currency provides an opportunity for small groups of students to compare and contrast the types and uses of money in Sudan and the United States.

My proposed theory implies a need for the academy to respond. Programs that prepare pre-service educators need to infuse activities that link college students with twice-migrated families. Instructors should lead groups through guided discussions that acknowledge students' apprehensions about the arrival of twice-migrated refugee families, but should do so to achieve resolutions based on parental and educator collaborations.

The perspective of twice-migrated Sudanese refugees that I proposed should inform educational practice and spur collaborative dialogues between school personnel and families. Although common practice, school-based collaborations will need to exceed the typical exchange of students' academic and behavioral performance. They should begin with honest and genuine pursuits to ascertain the refugee parents' historical experiences and present aspirations, a backdrop necessary for sustained joint efforts between parents and educators. Furthermore, they should inform teachers' conscious awareness about the cultural assimilations and negotiations that twice-located refugee students endure, most times alone and with angst. Alert to potential culture switching, teachers could engage refugee and non-refugee students in semi-structured interactions through which positive peer developments can occur.

### **Limitations & Future Research**

My theory should inform additional research pursuits needed on behalf of twice-migrated parents and children. Whether it is used for theory in quantitative studies testing (Newman & Benz, 1998) or theory exploration in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2003), it provides an anchor that forces a shift away from a deficit-oriented view of twice-migrated refugee youth to one of greater systemic awareness. Its applicability to the formation of hypotheses or research questions could result in greater breadth and depth beyond the scope presented in this article, an outcome beneficial to all concerned, including twice-migrated families and those who serve them.

An invitation for other researchers to employ my proposed theory is a profound limitation.

After all, I introduced this article with my perspective about retrospective analysis and how I employed it to describe my unique experience. To remain true to my personal story requires me to acknowledge that my theory may have no usefulness beyond my own recollections and current research pursuits. In addition, it may not match the unique experiences of twice-migrated Sudanese in other parts of the country and communities, or with other immigrant groups. At the very least, my use of the unique retrospective analysis and discussion thereof should continue a necessary discussion in the literature about the amelioration of educational challenges Sudanese refugee youth often encounter.

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